

Interview with New U.S. Consul General: 'Sense of Patience' Needed in Basra

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In July the United States opened a consulate general in the economically significant city of Basra in southern Iraq. NIQASH spoke to the new consul general about U.S. hopes for the “oil capital of Iraq,” how the consulate plans to deal with a local ban on U.S. troops and whether the new diplomatic office is just an excuse to keep U.S. soldiers on Iraqi soil.

NIQASH: The U.S. has an embassy in Baghdad and recently opened two consulates general, one in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan and another in Basra. Obviously there is a lot of very significant economic activity in Basra – it’s been called “the oil capital of Iraq.” But there is also significant political opposition to the U.S. presence here, with the local council apparently voting to ban U.S. troops from the central city. So why choose Basra as the site of one of two U.S. consulates general?

Consul General Piper Campbell: One of the things I have heard from a number of Iraqis here in Basra, and also at the federal level, is that Basra is like the neck of Iraq. It is very important to keep the neck open and strong so that the economy of Iraq isn’t strangled. I like that analogy and I think it’s very true. I think that the fact that the U.S. government has opened a consulate here is very much a recognition of the importance of Basra.

NIQASH: If everything goes according to plan – and in particular, in terms of Iraq’s oil revenues – Iraq is going to be a very rich nation, with an oil output to rival Saudi Arabia’s. Clearly the U.S. sees the way forward in Iraq in economic terms?

Campbell: I have had a number of conversations with the provincial governor of Basra and this is actually one of the key things that he has communicated to me: that they are really looking for those commercial ties and they definitely see Iraqi-U.S. engagement on a commercial level. My last job was in the office of the Deputy Secretary of State who’s been very involved in encouraging U.S. businesses to look at Iraq from the Washington end. So yes, I very much agree.

NIQASH: How long do you think it will take, though, before Iraqi-U.S. relations are mainly economic and commercial? It seems as though this might take a while.

Campbell: One of the approaches I have already taken around the world is to be both realistic and ambitious. So we are doing things in a step-by-step manner.

For example, in my second week on the job we hosted a U.S. business delegation. That was part of the process of the American Chamber of Commerce engaging more with Iraq, with a view to opening a chapter in Iraq. At some stage soon we will be able to open an American Chamber of Commerce chapter in Basra.

NIQASH: How did the American visitors you hosted react to the security situation in Basra, which is, arguably, still relatively tense, especially when compared with more peaceful cities like Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan?

Campbell: For people who are outside of Iraq, trying to figure out how you would enter the Iraqi market, has been really hard. It’s very forbidding. One of the key roles for all three of us - the consulate in Basra as well as the embassy in Baghdad and the consulate general in Erbil - is almost to act as a guide, to try and show where those opportunities might be.

I think one of the most helpful things we were able to do here was to put some American companies in direct contact with companies already working in Basra – that is, U.S. companies, local Iraqi companies and also some other international companies. [Editor’s note: Chinese and Russian oil companies also have interests in Basra.]

NIQASH: Surely though, there must be some sort of political opposition to these commercial opportunities – some of those opposed to the U.S.’ military presence in Iraq may well be opposed to what they see as a form of economic colonization. Have you come across any of this kind of attitude?

Campbell: I haven't seen that. But I may not have the level of visibility into how Iraqi companies work, on the inside. From the interactions I have observed, from the number of Iraqi companies that were interested in engaging with the [U.S. business] delegation and the fact that Basra has an investment council – the Basra Investment Commission, or BIC, I very much get the sense that Basra is open for business. And in both senses of the word “open.”

NIQASH: Yet the new Consulate General is located well out of the central city, inside heavily fortified grounds and connected to the well guarded airport. This doesn't seem all that open.

Campbell: One of the first things I should clarify is that the site of the consulate general is not actually as unusual as one might think. In a number of cities, the U.S. government has moved out of city centers. So the fact that we are so close to the airport is not so unusual. And we are indeed still in a transitional phase. We're still in the process of building our living and working quarters and working out how we will be implementing the worldwide State Department security standard, as well as all the logistical issues around having a U.S. government civilian presence.

NIQASH: Actually there are those critics of the U.S.' military presence in Iraq who have suggested that this new consulate may just be another excuse to keep as many U.S. troops here as possible, past any potential agreement for a U.S. withdrawal. Those critics use the U.S.' Baghdad embassy, which is the size of a small town and employs thousands of staff, as an example. What's your reply to those theories?

Campbell: My focus is on the provinces I am responsible for and on the economic, commercial and people-to-people ties. The State Department is responsible for security at the consulate general and this is a civilian facility. As we move forward, it will be secured by civilian organizations.

People visiting the consulate will come in under the same sort of security regime you see at any consulate or embassy around the world. In January, February, March of 2012, this is not going to be a U.S. military base. This is going to be a U.S. diplomatic representation.

As for comments on more complex, bilateral issues [like the U.S. troop withdrawal] the embassy is the right site to pose those questions.

NIQASH: Before becoming a consulate general, this U.S. mission in Basra had been mainly military, as well as a base for the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), a mixed group including diplomats and military personnel, all charged with helping local reconstruction efforts. How does the elevation in status to consulate general change things?

Campbell: Of course, the area of responsibility is much broader. We had other PRTs in other areas outside of Basra whereas this one was just responsible for Basra. So we've expanded our focus to understanding the situation in the whole southern part of Iraq. That broader perspective will inform our work.

NIQASH: What sort of new services is the Basra consulate general able to provide?

Campbell: I have been very cautious and straightforward, making sure that the people of Basra know that primary visa, and many other consular, services are still being provided by the embassy in Baghdad.

At this moment, we can provide emergency services to American citizens resident in our consular district. And we are already doing a lot of cultural interaction [with Iraqis], working with student groups, working with provincial officials as they look at travel to the United States. In many ways we are supporting and explaining the consular aspect of diplomacy. But we are not issuing visas or passports.

NIQASH: Do you worry at all that the elevation in status to one of just three, official diplomatic representations in Iraq, make the consulate general more of a target for armed groups there?

Campbell: I am excited about the change. My feeling is that the people here are ready for the change, they are ready for the evolution in the relationship and they are ready to seize those opportunities on the commercial side. So I feel this is simply a positive step. A consulate is a more normal way of doing business; I think we are very focused on getting to that more normal, bilateral, diplomatic relationship.

NIQASH: Speaking of which, local media recently reported that Basra's provincial council passed a resolution banning U.S. military from firstly, leaving the airport and secondly, entering the city. It seems that when they passed that resolution, they did differentiate between military personnel and diplomatic personnel. But it's not exactly a "normal relationship" and it must be causing some issues. How are you dealing with those?

Campbell: Let me answer that by describing the type of engagement that I have had, and that members of my team have been able to have, over the last month. Because I think that will dissolve some of the stories or rumors that are out there.

I should be very clear that we have been able to move into the city - and that we have moved into the city - every week over the last month, and nearly the entire time I have been here. So I have been able to have engagement with members of the provincial council.

A number of council members actually came to the opening [ceremony for the Consulate on July 5]. The governor was one of the guest speakers at the consulate's opening. And we have had other receptions and meetings here, at what I call home base.

Obviously we track the political situation here in Basra and we're very quickly learning that in Iraq there can be stories and articles out there that are not always what they seem at first glance. [Editor's note: the Arabic-language article that declared U.S. troops were completely banned from Basra and which didn't differentiate between diplomatic support and military, originated in a publication favored by the Sadrist political bloc, which has a strong anti-US policy.]

NIQASH: Have you also had a chance to speak to the average Basra man and woman on the street?

Campbell: Yes, I have. For me that's been one of the most positive developments since my arrival. For example, when I went to meet with some of the court judges and walked through that facility, and when I went to Basra University. I have been really thrilled by the warmth of the reception. It has made me feel more welcome.

NIQASH: So you believe things really are changing on the ground there in Basra?

Campbell: When you speak with people in Basra you do hear from them a certain critique, in terms of how things have been over the last year. You also hear their hopes that the future will be different. I have stressed economics in this conversation - many people in Basra believe that the way that their lives are going to be better in the future is through economic investment in the city and the beginning of the flow of oil revenues to Basra.

NIQASH: Do people in Basra tell you what they want from the U.S.? And if so, what is it?

Campbell: Yes, I have those conversations on a personal level and then also with government officials. Many people in Basra are focused on services. It won't be any surprise if I say that the people in Basra are hopeful that electricity supply will improve, especially over a long, hot summer. Many people are trying to understand what their own government should be providing and then also, what there are in terms of economic opportunities.

The conversation goes both ways and I am very straight forward. I have been very clear with people that the period of large-scale projects is behind us, as the U.S. military change their posture in the area.

NIQASH: Obviously one of your goals there as a diplomat is what you've described as the normalization of the relationship between the U.S. and Iraq. Do you have any prediction about how long this might take? Could it be five years or less? Or will it take decades?

Campbell: I have been a diplomat for 23 years and I have spent a lot of my career in conflict and post-conflict societies. So this question is something I have personally spent a lot of time thinking about. One of my last posts was in Cambodia and it was very interesting to talk to Cambodians about how deep the psychic scars that emerge from a conflict situation are. One of the things I bring to this conflict is to try and communicate a sense of patience, an understanding that these things are not easy, but that you have to keep moving forward and that you are going to be doing that step-by-step.

There will be these points where we will stop and we will turn around and look backwards and think "it's amazing what we have achieved this year," or in these five years. I think we won't necessarily perceive this while it's happening. We may only be able to say that was when we passed a major hurdle with the wisdom of hindsight.

NIQASH: Finally, you've been there for just under two months – how are you finding it on a personal level?

Campbell: Fascinating and challenging. I was working in Washington on issues related to Iraq and Afghanistan for the last three years, so I had a pretty realistic idea of what to expect. This is one of the most – if not, the most – important opportunities for the State Department, and for the U.S. civilian agencies, to move forward in support of a more normal bilateral relationship.

NIQASH: Consul General Piper Campbell, thank you for your time.